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Epictetus, Stoicism, and Slavery

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Abstract:

Epictetus was an ex-slave and a leading Stoic philosopher in the Roman Empire during the second-century. His devoted student, Arrian, recorded Epictetus' lectures and conversations in eight books titled *Discourses*, of which only four are extant. As an ex-slave and teacher, one expects to see him deal with the topic of slavery and freedom in great detail. However, few scholars have researched the relationship of Epictetus' personal life and his views on slavery.

In order to understand Epictetus' perspective, it is essential to understand the political culture of his day and the social views on slavery. During his early years, Epictetus lived in Rome and was Epaphroditus' slave. Epaphroditus was an abusive master, who served Nero as an administrative secretary. Around the same period, Seneca was a tutor and advisor to Nero. He was a Stoic philosopher, who counseled Nero on political issues and advocated the practice of clemency. In the mid to late first-century, Seneca spoke for a fair and kind treatment of slaves. He held a powerful position not only as an advisor to Nero, but also as a senator. While he promoted the humane treatment of slaves, he did not actively work to abolish slavery. Epaphroditus and Seneca both had profound influences in the way Epictetus viewed slaves and ex-slaves, relationships of former slaves and masters, and the meaning of freedom.

As a philosopher and teacher, Epictetus' views influenced his students and other scholars. Many of his students were aristocratic young men, who pursued political careers after completing their education with Epictetus. Even after his death, other scholars continued to study his Stoic philosophy. Marcus Aurelius was one such scholar, who was known as the philosopher emperor. He often quoted Epictetus and used his

teachings as a guideline for his own life. As an emperor, he was in a position to change the laws for treatment of slaves and the institution of slavery. While he instituted laws to protect the slaves from extreme abuses by their masters, he also implemented stricter laws against runaway slaves.

Neither Stoic philosophy nor its philosophers actively sought to eradicate slavery, but certain individuals saw slavery as a negative impact to their society. Even though Seneca and Marcus Aurelius shared the same philosophy as Epictetus, they came from the top echelon of the social order. Due to their social status, their opinions of slavery differ from those of Epictetus, an ex-slave.

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Timeline:

Beginning of Stoicism	333 BCE
Seneca's Life	1 BCE-65 CE
Nero's Reign	54-68 CE
Epictetus' Life	50/60-135 CE
Domitian's Reign	81-96 CE
Domitian exiles philosophers from Rome	88/89 and 92-95 CE
Marcus Aurelius' Life	121-180 CE
Marcus Aurelius's Reign	161-180 CE

Chapter 1: Epictetus, Stoicism, and Roman Slavery

In the study of ancient slavery, it is often difficult to obtain perspectives from sources other than those of the rich aristocratic men, who were slave owners. These aristocratic men were the writers of all the textual evidence that survives today. While there are several well-known ex-slaves of ancient Rome and Greece, no one knows for certain what they thought about the institution of slavery. One expects to find the ex-slaves to hold a different view of slavery than their freeborn counterparts. However, finding support for such a hypothesis is a difficult task because of the lack of textual or material evidence. Prominent ex-slave and playwright, Terence, wrote six plays; however, he did not directly address slavery.¹ One glimmer of hope comes from Epictetus, who was not only an ex-slave, but also a philosopher whose words were carefully recorded by his student, Lucius Flavius Arrianus (Arrian). Arrian compiled his teacher's lectures in the eight books titled *Discourses*. These four books contain examples of how Stoic theory applies to practical life, and Epictetus' examples are frequently made from a slave's perspective unlike any other philosophers or writers. While Epictetus does not support slavery, he also does not vocally advocate for abolition.

Biography of Epictetus: Epictetus was born to a slave woman around 50-60 CE in Hierapolis, Phrygia (modern day Pamukkale, Turkey).² While it is unknown when he moved to Rome, he ended up a slave to Epaphroditus, an imperial secretary and a freedman of Nero. Epaphroditus was executed after he helped Nero commit suicide.³ While there is little information about Epictetus' early life, he suffered a physical injury,

¹ In Suetonius' *De Viris Illustribus*, *De Poetis*, *De Vita Terentii*: Suetonius states that Terence owned slaves.

² Oldfather, 1925:vii: Oldfather cites: J.R.S. Sterrett: *Papers of the Amer. School of Class. Stud. At Athens*, 1884-5, 3, 315f.; G. Kaibel: *Hermes*, 1888, 23, 542 ff.

³ Suetonius, *Nero*, 49.

perhaps at the hands of his master, Epaphroditus, which caused his lameness.⁴ Also when he was still a slave, he learned about Stoic philosophy by listening to the lessons of C. Musonius Rufus, a Roman Senator and Stoic philosopher.⁵

There are no dates for Epictetus' manumission; however, it was before 89 CE. At this time, Domitian banished the philosophers from Rome and Epictetus moved to Nicopolis in Greece to start a philosophical school.⁶ Many aristocratic young men studied at his school. Among them was Arrian, previously mentioned writer of the *Discourses*, who later became a historian and consul in 129 or 130 CE. Arrian's letter to Lucius Gellius precedes the first chapter of Book I of the *Discourses*. In the letter, Arrian states that he wrote the *Discourses* just as he had heard from Epictetus. Therefore, the *Discourses* are written in *koine* Greek, which Epictetus would have spoken, as opposed to the Attic dialect favored by Arrian and his contemporary scholars.⁷ Arrian wrote *Anabasis of Alexander* in Attic.⁸

Epictetus followed the teachings of Stoicism carefully and lived a modest life. He had few possessions and kept his doors unlocked.⁹ When a thief stole his iron lamp, he replaced it with an earthenware one.¹⁰ Although he did not marry, he lived with a woman and raised a child whose parent planned to expose it.¹¹ Others knew him as a great wit, and Lucian refers to Epictetus as a 'marvelous old man'.¹² He was also extremely modest

⁴ Epictetus, *Discourses* IV.1.151: Epictetus alludes to his lameness; Oldfather, 1927: ix

⁵ Epictetus, *Discourses* I.7.32

⁶ "Epictetus," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Spring 2009

⁷ Oldfather, 1925: xiii

⁸ Chinnock, 1893: Preface

⁹ Oldfather, 1925: x

¹⁰ Epictetus, *Discourses* I.18.15-16

¹¹ "Epictetus," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Spring 2009.

¹² Oldfather, 1925: xvi

and never called himself a philosopher. Epictetus was acquainted with Hadrian¹³ (reigned from 117-138 CE) and was the contemporary of Plutarch and Tacitus. He died around 135 CE.¹⁴

Epictetus' experience as a slave is the one element that separates him from the other famous Stoic scholars such as Seneca and Marcus Aurelius. In order to understand how Epictetus diverges from the main Stoic tenets, it is important to understand the philosophy as a whole. Due to the influence Stoicism had during the first and second century CE and perhaps because of Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius' popularity, much of their writing survived. From these extant works, many scholars analyzed the various components of Stoic philosophy. From the scholars' findings, readers gain a better understanding of the logical structure and position Stoics took on various issues. Even with the copious volumes of Stoic analysis, little research explores Epictetus' personal view on the institution of slavery and whether his views had any influence on the moral actions of Roman elites such as Marcus Aurelius and Arrian.

History of Stoicism: Stoicism began in the 4th century BCE in Athens. In 301 BCE, Zeno of Citium in Cyprus (333–262 BCE) founded a new philosophical school in the *Stoa Poikile*, which means the 'porch'. The two other founding members were Cleanthes of Assus (d. 232 BCE) and Chrysippus (d. ca. 206 BCE). After Zeno founded the school it was Chrysippus, who "transmuted Stoicism into a comprehensive and systematic philosophy-it is said that 'if Chrysippus had not existed, the Stoa would not have existed either'".¹⁵ This period is the Old Stoa in which "they rejected hedonism and counseled a

¹³ Oldfather, 1925: xii

¹⁴ "Epictetus," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Spring 2009.

¹⁵ Barnes, Oxford History, 1986: 367.

life of ‘virtue’; in physics they accepted a form of materialism but denied atomism; in logic they were empiricists, but they assigned a major role to reason in the development of knowledge”.¹⁶ Although only fragments of earlier Stoic works remain, there are numerous references to Chrysippus by late Stoics. Much of what Epictetus draws on is directly from Chrysippus rather than the Middle Stoa.¹⁷ The second period, Middle Stoa, occurred during the first and second century BCE and was headed by Panaetius of Rhodes (c. 185-109 BCE) and Posidonius of Apamea (135-51 BCE).¹⁸ The Late Stoa is best known as Roman Stoicism of the first two centuries CE, which includes Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius.¹⁹ While it was developed through the Middle Stoicism, its philosophy evolved to a practical guideline for an ethical lifestyle.²⁰ This pragmatic approach was more attractive to the practical nature of the Romans. Stoicism changed into a form that harmonized with the Roman culture rather than the philosophy changing the culture.

Transition of Stoicism during the Republican Period: During the late period, there were two currents of Stoicism, which were so closely related and stemmed from the same Middle Stoa, that the differences are often neglected. Orlando Patterson calls the first current reactionary Stoicism, which is tied to the conservative politicians starting in the 2nd century BCE. The Stoic philosophy appealed to the elites not for the educational value of the philosophy, but for “accommodating many traditional Roman attitudes about human excellence” and it provided a theoretical basis for their “customs and historical

¹⁶ Oxford History, 1986: 369.

¹⁷ Throughout the Discourses, Epictetus refers back to Chrysippus, but never mentions Panaetius of Rhodes or Posidonius of Apamea.

¹⁸ Oxford History, 1986: 368.

¹⁹ Oxford History, 1986: 368.

²⁰ Patterson, 1991: 266.

examples”.²¹ In the minds of upper class Romans, the Roman way was the way of reason.²²

Reason, which was divine, ruled the cosmos. Human beings, as creatures of reason, shared in the cosmos. The wise man, living according to nature, reconciled the divinity in himself with that of the cosmos. In this way he was free, since his conformity with the cosmos was exactly what he, in the exercise of his reason, would want to will.²³

The connection of reason to the divine was attractive to the ruling class Romans because they already believed their success was due to divine favor.²⁴ According to the logical structure of Orlando Patterson, the Romans thought that their existence was exactly how the divine intended them to live since reason, divinity, and nature existed together and in harmony.²⁵ The idea that the Romans were living in accordance to the divine and conforming to the cosmos and nature was particularly appealing during the Republican expansion because as Cicero stated the “men who were superior in virtue and spirit should rule over the weak and the weak should obey the strong”.²⁶ The Romans justified their dominance in the Mediterranean because the divine made them superior to their enemies.

According to Orlando Patterson, another aspect of reactionary Stoicism states that only the wise were good and free, and the ignorant were bad and slavish. While all humans shared the same rationality as the divine, not all succeed in reaching the level of

²¹ Patterson, 1991: 265.

²² Patterson, 1991: 265.

²³ Patterson, 1991: 265.

²⁴ Jones and Sidwell, 1997: 254.

²⁵ Patterson, 1991: 265

²⁶ Patterson, 1991: 265.

rationality to become wise. Since they believed that there were very few wise men capable of ruling, the narrow elites could justify their continued to rule and maintain their dominance.

The second current of Late Stoa Patterson identifies is reformist Stoicism, which placed an emphasis on personal freedom and providence.²⁷ Humans do not simply conform to the divine spirit, but rather they are the spirit and identify themselves with the divine. Reformist Stoics concluded that they were free and this freedom gave them the power to be leaders and rule.²⁸ Similar to the reactionary Stoics, the reformist Stoics also believed that only the good and the wise were able to hold public offices. However, they differed from the reactionary Stoics because the reformist Stoics believed that the individuals should remove politicians and change the structure of the governing body. The new strain of Stoicism re-enforced the idea that the wise should rule. When an elite Roman believes he is a wise man and accepts this new doctrine, he also desires to rule. He is able “to use force and destroy the traditional system in order to get his way, that is, to promote his power and freedom”.²⁹ This aspect of the reformist Stoics opened a window to critique slavery because the idea allows people to criticize the social institutions.

In contrast to the reactionary Stoicism, this new strain stated it was possible to obtain wisdom and virtue through training. The ability to train further opposed hereditary rule. In addition, the idea that one may obtain virtue through training “abandoned the extreme dualism of wise-free and foolish-slave person, and to adopt a more practical, humane

²⁷ Patterson, 1991: 268.

²⁸ Patterson, 1991: 269.

²⁹ Patterson, 1991: 269.

view which saw human vices and virtue in terms of gradation”.³⁰ There are many different levels of freedom and slavery.

Patterson believes during the last century of the republic, these two Stoic sides opposed each other despite many similarities. One side supported the conservatives and other supported the more radical and reformist ideas, an imperial version of Stoicism³¹. While reactionary Stoics seemed to have the upper hand during the Republican period, second current of Stoicism resurfaced during the early *Principate* with the support of Augustus, who disliked the first current of Stoicism of Younger Cato, Brutus, and Cassius. It is within this context of reformist Stoicism that Epictetus was educated in the Stoic philosophy.

Stoic Tenets: Stoic philosophy can be divided into three topics: logic, physics, and ethics. Although the Stoics in the first and second century CE dealt with all three areas, they were mainly concerned with ethics, especially the idea of living a virtuous life and maintaining one’s freedom through constant practice of these ethical teachings. Epictetus took the Stoic theories of moral responsibility and used the theories to teach his students how to govern their own morality and find individual freedom. According to William Stephens, the basic Stoic tenets are as follows:

First, the Stoics should live a virtuous life because virtue is the sole human good. The good leads to happiness and the good must also benefit the possessor at all times. The Stoics viewed virtue, prudence, justice, courage, and moderations as good, while vices, foolishness, and injustice are truly bad things.³² The Stoics thought that Zeus, the most

³⁰ Patterson, 1991: 269.

³¹ Patterson, 1991: 270.

³² Stephens, 2007: 1.

rational being, created the universe and controlled all aspects. Zeus shares this rationality with humans so they could live a ‘life according to reason’, ‘life according to virtue’, and ‘happiness’ or ‘the attainment of happiness’.³³

The good also means that human beings must “live consistently with and according to nature”.³⁴ The Stoics believed that living a virtuous life was living according to nature and reason. As A.A Long points out, reason and nature are inseparable:

One should live according to nature because this accords with reason; one should live rationally because this accords with nature, etc.³⁵

In order to become a true Stoic sage, one must possess complete rationality so that one can live in accordance to nature.

Second, external goods, such as health and wealth do not affect human happiness.³⁶ Epictetus states that the things “under our control are moral purpose and all the acts of moral purpose; but not under our are the body, the parts of the body, possession, parents, brothers, children, country-in a word, all that with which we associate”.³⁷ The Stoic lives badly if he gives value to externals. In order to reach the top level of rationality, the Stoic must learn to live free of the truly bad things and not place value on things outside of his control. William Stephens gives five reasons why Epictetus finds externals irrational:

1. Our “success in acquiring them is, by their nature, never guaranteed”.³⁸ No matter how much a Stoic worries about it, he will not be able to change the externals;

³³ Long, 1996: 134.

³⁴ Arius Didymus, 63.

³⁵ Long, 1996: 134.

³⁶ Stephens, 2007: 1.

³⁷ Epictetus, Discourses, I.22.10-11

³⁸ Stephens, 2007: 10.

- therefore, it is a waste of time and effort to worry about the things one cannot change.
2. Individuals must not concentrate on the externals because “it is much more difficult to manage many things (externals) than to concentrate our attention on only one thing (the faculty which makes use of sense-impression)”. There are too many externals things that “bog us down” and it sacrifices “one’s peace of mind in the false belief that external is a good which contributes to one’s happiness”.³⁹
 3. Our “losses and pain have to do only with our possessions”.⁴⁰ If you don’t admire the externals, you will not be upset by its loss.⁴¹
 4. Externals drive hostile competition and turmoil when everyone tries to obtain the same externals.⁴² Externals are limited, which creates competition. Since humans will naturally look out for their self-interest, it will create atmosphere for “plotting, scheming, stealing, and fighting”, which are all the things that are bad for the soul.⁴³
 5. Pursuing externals “requires sacrificing one’s own moral worth and dignity, i.e. what is truly one’s own”.⁴⁴

It is important to understand the distinctions of externals, which will prove to be available in the later discussion of slavery.

The third Stoic tenet states that a simple yet hard life is preferable to one that is soft and secure.⁴⁵ In the face of adversities and hardship, individuals get the opportunity to

³⁹ Stephens, 2007: 11.

⁴⁰ Epictetus, Discourses, I.18.16

⁴¹ Stephens, 2007: 12.

⁴² Epictetus, Discourses, I.22.11-14

⁴³ Stephens, 2007: 12.

⁴⁴ Stephens, 2007: 14.

practice the Stoic tenets. These individuals must make difficult decisions for the sake of their souls by foregoing luxuries.

Fourth, a person, who strives to live a good life, works to remove, not moderate emotions, which allow utmost rational activity.⁴⁶ The Stoic makes decisions based on reason and not on emotions. Since emotions are tied to external factors such as desiring status, a person, or luxuries, one must work to get rid of these desires.

Fifth, virtue is a matter of knowing what is one's own and what is not one's own, insofar as one is capable of doing so. Once the Stoic student recognizes the difference between internals and externals, he can concentrate solely on the internals, the things under his control. The Stoic must accept that he cannot control the externals and live the best possible life improving his moral purpose.

Sixth, the Stoic must help others to do the same.⁴⁷ While the Stoics knew it was useless to change other people's opinions, they knew it was important to provide tools to others, who desire to achieve rationality. Whether the recipients of the tools achieved rationality mattered less since it was out of the teacher's control. However, it was completely within the Stoic teacher's control to share his wisdom and provide guidance to others. Helping others to achieve Stoic education is a part of human compassion and kinship.

Stoicism on Slavery: These Stoic tenets seem to stand against slavery since they advocate a modest, hard life, and stress the importance of a person's soul. The Stoics

⁴⁵ Stephens, 2007: 1.

⁴⁶ Stephens, 2007: 1.

⁴⁷ Stephens, 2007: 1.

even believed that no one was a slave by nature.⁴⁸ Natural slaves were anyone “who because of some inherent defect in their make-up were born to be slaves”.⁴⁹ Since all humans received rationality from the divine, they all had equal potential. No one was better than another by nature. The people were separated because each individual utilized rationality differently.

While the Stoics did not believe in nature slavery, it probably never occurred to the wealthy elites to abolish slavery because slaves were an important part of the society’s economy. Also, slavery existed in all the nearby societies such as the Greeks and had existed for several hundred years of Roman history.⁵⁰ Therefore, the idea that slavery was contrary to nature never gained any momentum nor led to the possibility of abolition.

The Stoics chose to focus instead on personal freedom and stated that legal slavery was of no significance, since it “is not in our control, it is one of the externals, like health and illness, wealth and poverty, high and low status.”⁵¹ An example of this comes from Diogenes Laertius 7.121.2:

The Stoics say: ‘Only he [sc.; the wise man] is free, but the bad are slaves. For freedom is the power of autonomous action, but slavery is the lack of autonomous action. There is also a different slavery which consists in subordination, and a third consisting in possession as well as subordination; this last is contrasted with despotism, which is a bad state.’⁵²

⁴⁸ Manning, 1989: 1535.

⁴⁹ Manning, 1989: 1522.

⁵⁰ Bradley, 1994: 16: In the Twelve Tables from the fifth century B.C.E, Roman’s first codified body of law, shows that the existence of slavery was normal.

⁵¹ Garnsey, 1996: 132.

⁵² Garnsey, 1996: 130.

The only path to true freedom is to look inward at the “condition of the soul, not the body”.⁵³ As discussed in the Stoic tenet section, everything relating to the body is external. The externals include physical health or the condition of the body such as illness or lameness. The Stoics ignored these external matters and concentrated on the internals such as the health of the soul.

Peter Garnsey summarizes Stoics’ position of slavery in four points:

First, slavery according to the law, institutional slavery, is an external, beyond our control, and therefore not worth caring about. Second, slavery as a condition of the soul is both within our control and all-important. Third, only the wise or good man is free and independent; the inferior/foolish or bad man is dependent and slavish. Fourth, the wise are very few, while virtually all of humanity is inferior.

Most men are (moral) slaves.⁵⁴

Thus, a person can obtain freedom by practicing the set of moral guidelines provided by Stoicism. No matter what position a person hold, that person can either be a slave or free person; it all depends on how he decides to live his life. Garnsey concludes that Stoicism’s contribution was shifting the debate about slavery from actual to metaphorical slavery. By doing this, the Stoics and the ruling-class elites did not have to justify the use of slaves.

History of Roman Republic and Slavery: During the third and second century BCE, the Romans started a massive campaign of expansion through wars and territorial acquisitions. This expansion gained momentum with the three Punic Wars. With an aggressive and well-disciplined military, Rome became a powerhouse in the

⁵³ Garnsey, 1996: 132.

⁵⁴ Garnsey, 1996: 133.

Mediterranean. During this period of expansion and conquest, Rome enslaved the conquered people and the slave population grew exponentially from the spoils of war. By early imperial period, slavery was not only common, but also a major component of Rome's economic structure. Although modern readers see ancient slavery from a more positive view than American slavery, it is important to note the harsh condition in which these slaves existed. There is no denying that there were many privileged slaves with high status and wealth. Keith Bradley accepts the possibility of close relationship between slaves and masters and the 'social death' of slavery is often exaggerated, but he stresses the harsh condition in which these slaves lived.⁵⁵ Many slaves in mines, farms, and other physical labor camps endured inhumane conditions. In addition, household slaves were subject to the physical and sexual maltreatment by their masters. While there were incentives to treat slaves kindly or fairly, there were no laws to protect the slaves from harsh punishments such as whipping and starving. Masters had complete control over the life and death of their slaves. Slaves were treated as property and possessed no human rights such as nationality or family.

Despite the inhumane management of the slaves, there were no abolition movements anytime during the republican or imperial period. There were some laws, which in theory protected the slaves from harsh, unfair treatments by the masters.⁵⁶ Whether Stoicism or its philosophers were the cause of humane conducts and laws is debatable.⁵⁷ The *Lex Petronia*, from either Tiberius or Nero's reign, prevented slave masters from selling their slaves to fight in the arena without judicial process. During the period of Nero or before,

⁵⁵ Bradley, 1994: 76-7.

⁵⁶ Manning, 1989: 1532.

⁵⁷ Manning, 1989: 1519-1520.

the *praefectus urbi* was instructed to listen to the complaints from the slaves about their masters.⁵⁸ In the provinces, the governors were instructed to do the same when the slaves took sanctuary at the emperor's statute.⁵⁹ When judges listened to doubtful cases, the decision tended to favor freedom, *favor libertatis*.⁶⁰ Scholars such as F. Pringsheim and H. Wallon credit the Stoic influence for these humane conditions because of the significant influence wielded by the Stoics in the government and the emperors who generally accepted Stoic moral values.⁶¹ However, scholars such as Westermann do not believe that Stoicism was the reason for these legislative changes, but rather the changes were due to practical reasons.⁶² The debate between these two camps will continue since there is no clear evidence in favor of one side or another. No one can say with certainty that Stoicism was the reason for humane treatment and legislative actions; however, it is equally difficult to say that Stoicism did not have any influence.

C.E. Manning argues that the Stoics accepted the institution of slavery since Stoicism taught that individuals must accept the divine providence and the existing social order.⁶³ However, Stoicism looks at the man's soul and the health of the soul depended on his own actions. Oppressing a fellow human whether he is a slave or a freeborn damages one's soul. Another key element of Stoicism is that all men are in kinship with each other, no matter their status. Each man is a brother to another and the offspring of Zeus. Therefore, each man has a responsibility to care for the other, the whole human race.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Manning, 1989: 1532.

⁵⁹ Manning, 1989: 1532.

⁶⁰ Manning, 1989: 1533.

⁶¹ Manning, 1989: 1533-4.

⁶² Manning, 1989: 1534: Westermann argues that the change in policy was due to a decline in slave supply from piracy and war.

⁶³ Manning, 1989: 1529-30.

⁶⁴ Garnsey, 1996: 138.

While Stoic ideology did not require them to change the world around them, which is entirely an external issue, the philosophers taught the students to act with kindness towards each other. Even if Stoicism did not change the laws, the philosophers attempted to give the politicians the tools to rule with virtue and kindness.

Peter Garnsey finds Epictetus' silence on the topic of just or unjust nature of slavery peculiar considering Epictetus was once a slave.⁶⁵ If one considers this time period objectively, it is not surprising. First, the political and socio-economic condition did not allow for the possibility of abolition to enter the minds of the ruling class. It is important to remember that Epictetus instructed the aristocratic young men and the recorder of his lectures was Arrian, who later became a senator. Therefore, Epictetus' lectures reflected the values of the ruling class because his primary audiences were members of the elite, ruling class. Second, even if Epictetus had spoken out against slavery, it does not guarantee that his words would have been preserved. Since copying was a laborious and costly task, rich slave-owning aristocrats would not have wanted to preserve any text that would have painted a negative view of their lifestyle. Slaves were such important assets for the rich and the powerful that the first abolition law, Slavery Abolition Act of 1807 and 1833, was established in England.⁶⁶ Third, Epictetus is vocal about slavery and other luxuries from a moral standpoint. For Epictetus, slavery wasn't about a legal status of a person, but it was a moral question.

It is difficult to know for certain where the Stoics stood on the topic of legal slavery. On the one hand, they did not believe in natural slavery. On the other hand, they

⁶⁵ Garnsey, 1996: 135.

⁶⁶ England's National Archive.

seemed to generally accept the institution as part of the natural social order. Stoics were more concerned with internal things such as virtue and wisdom, all the things that keeps the soul healthy. Epictetus also follows the Stoics guideline and concentrates on spiritual freedom rather than the legal status of a person. However, Epictetus' experience in slavery gave him a perspective different from that of any other scholar in the ancient world.

Chapter 2: Epictetus' View on Slavery and Freedom

In the four books of the *Discourses*, Epictetus never discusses the institution of slavery. He is concerned with defining internal freedom and how slavery can corrupt the soul of both masters and slaves. His preoccupation with freedom was so great that the word 'free' and 'freedom' appears about 130 times in the *Discourses*.⁶⁷ While Epictetus was concerned with internal freedom, he is more critical of the institution of slavery than other influential persons in the Roman Empire. Epictetus' criticism of slavery comes in two forms: 1) Slavery is contrary to reason because both masters and slaves place too much value on externals such as masters' desire for luxury and slaves' fear of punishment or bodily harm and 2) Slavery is contrary to nature because all humans share in the same kinship and rationality with the gods. Also slavery requires the use of force and violence, which goes against nature. Besides these two arguments, the most compelling evidence that Epictetus was critical of slavery comes from the perspective of his story telling. Epictetus often looks at freedom and slavery from the slave's perspective, which provides an insight into the slave's inner psyche.

I. Slavery is contrary to reason: Epictetus criticizes slavery because it is contrary to reason. There are two main reasons why slavery is contrary to reason. One, masters' desire for luxury is irrational. Two, slaves' fear from punishment and bodily comfort is irrational. In order to understand why Epictetus claims luxuries and punishments are irrational, we must understand rationality.

What is rationality? Stoics believed that all humans share in the common rationality of the divine, which is what sets the humans apart from the animals. Humans use the

⁶⁷ Oldfather, 1925: xvii

ability to reason in order to live a virtuous life and have a healthy soul. A person can achieve a healthy soul by following the Stoic tenets. One of the most important functions of rationality in Epictetus' ethical system is to understand "that some things are up to us while others are not up to us".⁶⁸ Stoic education helps individuals to distinguish between the things under one's control (internals) and outside of one's control (externals). Once the individual can distinguish between internals and externals, he can concentrate only on the internals. The internals are conceptions or opinions, impulses to choose, desires, and aversions. These are all the things an individual can change based on his decisions. The externals are body, possessions, parents, brothers, children, and country. These are all the things an individual is associated with, but cannot change by his actions.⁶⁹

Although everyone has the same capacity to think rationally, not everyone utilizes reason the same way. Epictetus states that most people fall somewhere along the spectrum of completely rational and completely irrational. Part of the reason why people have different levels of rationality is because each person sees the world and his position in the world differently than others.

What is acceptable and unacceptable? Once the individual can differentiate between internals and externals, he must decide what he is willing to accept and not accept based on his rationality and position in life. He must decide at what cost he will allow an unacceptable behavior to become an acceptable behavior. The person's decision depends on how he values his own self worth and the worth of material goods. In order to understand his self worth, he must know at what price he is willing to sell himself.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Stephens, 2007: 7.

⁶⁹ Stephens, 2007: 8.

⁷⁰ Epictetus, Discourses, I.2.11

Example of different acceptance level: For instance, a slave born into slavery has a different self worth than a captive, just as a captive has a different self worth than a senator. A slave born into slavery doesn't know another way of life. He may think dressing or bathing his master is a normal part of daily life, so he does not feel injustice. The slave does not see the difference between a personal attendant and a cobbler because both perform a specific task or a job. The slave may count himself lucky to have a generous master who feeds and clothes him. He may hold a negative view of the freedmen's life as they struggle to make a living and support their families. Another slave with a terrible master, who often beats his slaves, may feel the injustice more acutely. A captive slave, who had experienced freedom, feels humiliated when he bathes and clothes another man. The captive slave must decide whether his life or his humiliation has a greater value. A man, who is a senator, has lived all his life with slave attendants and fully expects the slaves to service him. He values himself on a much higher level than the slaves because he sees the slaves as mere tools. Epictetus' goal was to take these different rationalities and acceptance levels and guide the students to a more single standard way of thinking.

Epictetus states that one should only worry about the internals and not place any value on the externals because it is irrational to place value on externals. For the Stoics, it is useless to worry about things one cannot control such as the family one was born into, personal health, or other people's action:

Once one has firmly grasped the truth of the judgment that what is beyond one's control lies entirely outside the realm of one's responsibility, then one can judge

that from a moral standpoint any result, outcome, event, occurrence, or happening is utterly indifferent.⁷¹

Individuals should treat all news with indifference because they can't change the outcome and there is no use in worrying about things they can't control.⁷²

Masters' desire for luxury is irrational: A person, who does not worry about externals, does not care about luxuries, power, and status. Slaves were a major component for not only maintaining the wealth of the slave masters, but also slaves were used to increase the value of the masters' wealth. Slave masters saw property as high status, which in turn equated to high opinion received by others. However, for the Stoics, it is irrational to amass wealth in order to change outside perceptions. As seen earlier, an attempt to change other people's opinion is not only useless, but also an impossible task. When the individual attempts to increase his wealth, status, and position, he depends on other people to gain these luxuries.

Epictetus provides an example of an irrational person, who values externals too much and depended on others to gain his luxuries. Epictetus' ex-master, Epaphroditus owned a slave named Felicio, but Epaphroditus sold the slave when he became useless. By happen chance, Felicio ended up as the Imperial cobbler, which prompted Epaphroditus to pay insincere compliments to Felicio because of his new powerful position as the emperor's cobbler.⁷³ The point Epictetus makes is that Epaphroditus, who obtained his legal freedom, still continues to be a slave because of his greed and desires.

Epaphroditus, as so many others, had an insatiable appetite for power and status, which

⁷¹ Stephens, 2007: 55.

⁷² Stephens, 2007: 54.

⁷³ Epictetus, Discourses, I.19.18-22: Epaphroditus was a freedman of Nero and an ex-master of Epictetus.

were all external matters. Due to his greed, Epaphroditus even had to pay compliments to a slave, whom he sold.

In another example, Epictetus talks about Felicio, who became corrupt and arrogant because of the power he received as the Imperial cobbler:

οὐκ οἶδα, πῶς ἐστρατήγησας, πόθεν τὴν ὑπατείαν ἔλαβες, τίς σοι αὐτὴν ἔδωκεν;
ἐγὼ μὲν οὐδὲ ζῆν ἤθελον, εἰ διὰ Φηλικίωνα ἔδει ζῆσαι τῆς ὀφρύος αὐτοῦ καὶ
τοῦ δουλικοῦ φρυάγματος ἀνασχόμενον. οἶδα γάρ, τί ἐστὶ δοῦλος εὐτυχῶν ὥς
δοκεῖ καὶ τετυφλωμένος.

Translation: Don't I know how you came to be praetor, how you got your consulship, who gave it to you? As for me, I should not care even to live, if I had to owe my life to Felicio, putting up with his insolence and slavish arrogance; for I know what a slave is, who is prosperous as the world goes, and puffed up with pride.⁷⁴

This passage illustrates a common occurrence in the Imperial period when freedmen were able to obtain higher office by gaining the favors of emperors. In order to get the attention of the emperor, these freedmen approached the people close to the emperor such as the chambermaid or a cobbler as in this case. Epictetus points out that for him, it is not worth his dignity to pay insincere attention in order to gain imperial favors. Epictetus uses the word 'slavish' in a negative way, which indicates his acceptance of the Roman stereotype that prominent slaves and freedmen were more arrogant than the elites.

Orlando Patterson states that the upper class Romans held the wealthy freedmen in contempt because they were materialistic and ostentatious. Patterson points out the

⁷⁴ Epictetus, Discourses, IV.1.149-150

elite's hypocrisy because "the native Roman elite was arguably one of the most rapaciously materialistic and ostentatious in the entire history of ruling classes".⁷⁵

A further example of irrational attention to personal desire and greed is a man who was returning to Rome from exile. This man told Epictetus that he wished to spend the rest of his life in peace and quiet. Epictetus replied that the man would forget his resolve as soon as he caught sight of Rome and was granted permission to enter the court.

νῦν οὖν τί ἐποίησεν; πρὶν ἔλθεῖν εἰς τὴν Ῥώμην, ἀπήντησαν αὐτῷ παρὰ
Καίσαρος πινακίδες: ὁ δὲ λαβὼν πάντων ἐκείνων ἐξελάθετο καὶ λοιπὸν ἐν ἐξ
ένος ἐπισεσώρευκεν.

Translation: Well, now, what did he do? Before he reached Rome, letters from Caesar met him; and as soon as he received them, he forgot all those resolutions of his, and ever since he has been piling up one property after another.⁷⁶

This is a clear example of how even people who have resolved to live without luxury often fail when the opportunity for additional wealth appears. The desire for wealth is so great that the prospect of wealth outweighs a tranquil life.

Slaves fear physical punishments and bodily harm; both of which are examples of externals: Stoics must remember that they should not fear physical punishment.

These are all the externals relating to the body:

"εἰπὲ τὰ ἀπόρρητα." οὐ λέγω: τοῦτο γὰρ ἐπ' ἐμοί ἐστιν. "ἀλλὰ δῆσω σε."
ἄνθρωπε. τί λέγεις; ἐμέ; τὸ σκέλος μου δῆσεις, τὴν προαίρεσιν δὲ οὐδ' ὁ Ζεὺς νικῆσαι δύναται. "εἰς φυλακὴν σε βαλῶ." τὸ σωματίον. "ἀποκεφαλίσω σε." πότε οὖν σοὶ εἶπον, ὅτι μόνου ἐμοῦ ὁ τράχηλος ἀναπότμητός ἐστιν; ταῦτα ἔδει

⁷⁵ Patterson, 1991: 244.

⁷⁶ Epictetus, Discourses, I.10.5

μελετᾷν τοὺς φιλοσοφοῦντας, ταῦτα καθ' ἡμέραν γράφειν, ἐν τούτοις
γυμνάζεσθαι.

Translation: “Tell your secret.” I say not a word; for this is under my control.

“But I will fetter you.” What is that you say, man? Fetter me? My leg you will fetter, but my moral purpose not even Zeus himself has power to overcome. “I will throw you into prison.” My paltry body, rather! “I will behead you.” Well, when did I ever tell you that mine was the only neck that could not be severed?

These are the lessons that philosophers ought to rehearse, these they ought to write down daily, in these they ought to exercise themselves.⁷⁷

Following the guidance above, two things would happen. First, it would create bad slaves because the slaves could choose to die rather than to serve their masters. Second, the slave economy would deteriorate because the slaves would chose death or the slave masters would have to give in to the slaves’ demands. Since the Stoic does not care about his body, he acts without fear of physical harm. He makes decisions based on his moral ethics, which not even Zeus has the power to overcome. The divine can only control the externals, while the individuals can only control the internals. The internals are all the aspect of the human soul, which even the slave has the power to control without outside influences. Since this is a difficult task for many people, Epictetus stresses his point by stating that Stoics must practice this lesson daily. It is something that requires constant practice and attention.

Argument for slavery: The complex nature of Stoic philosophy comes through in the tension of Epictetus’ moral teachings. Epictetus distracts attention from actual

⁷⁷ Epictetus, Discourses, I.1.23-25

slavery by focusing on moral slavery, in which he minimizes the importance of social rankings. By placing a heavier emphasis on moral slavery, he seems more critical of slaves who desire freedom. Epictetus criticizes a slave's desire for manumission by stating that the slaves do not understand the true meaning of freedom:

Ὁ δοῦλος εὐθύς εὐχεται ἀφεθῆναι ἐλεύθερος. διὰ τί; δοκεῖτε, ὅτι τοῖς εἰκοστώναις ἐπιθυμεῖ δοῦναι ἀργύριον; οὐ· ἀλλ' ὅτι φαντάζεται μέχρι νῦν διὰ τὸ μὴ τετυχηκέναι τούτου ἐμποδίζεσθαι καὶ δυσροεῖν.

Translation: It is the slave's prayer that he be set free immediately. Why? Do you think it is because he is eager to pay his money to the men who collect the five per cent tax? No, it is because he fancies that up till now he is hampered and uncomfortable, because he has not obtained his freedom from slavery.⁷⁸

A slave sees his bondage and constant obedience to his master as the most obvious restriction of personal freedom. He is willing to spend his entire savings to obtain manumission. The slave thinks that being a freedman will make him happy because he will be able to live free from his master.

In the following passage, Epictetus explains what freedom means to the slave and how that slave sees manumission as his ultimate happiness:

ἂν ἀφεθῶ, φησὶν, 'εὐθύς πᾶσα εὐροια, οὐδενὸς ἐπιστρέφομαι, πᾶσιν ὡς ἴσος καὶ ὅμοιος λαλῶ, πορεύομαι ὅπου θέλω, ἔρχομαι ὅθεν θέλω καὶ ὅπου θέλω.

Translation: If I am set free,' he says, 'immediately it is all happiness, I shall pay no attention to anybody, I talked to everybody as an equal and as one in the same station in life, I go where I please, I come whence I please and where I please.'⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Epictetus, Discourses, IV.1.33

⁷⁹ Epictetus, Discourses, IV.1.34

As a member of the lowest ranking social group, the slave is socially inferior and associates his inequality to unhappiness. He desires others to see him as an equal. He assumes that upon manumission, he will no longer endure the inferior status and be able to communicate with others with newfound confidence.

Epictetus continues by describing the never-ending human desire for wealth, status, and power. The ex-slave says that his life would be better if he had rings (symbol of Equestrian status) on his fingers. Epictetus argues that the man's desire continues to grow even after he becomes an Equestrian and he would wish for a campaign in order to get the spoils of war.⁸⁰ Finally when the Equestrian has become a senator:

καὶ γένηται συγκλητικός, τότε γίνεται δοῦλος εἰς σύλλογον ἐρχόμενος, τότε τὴν καλλίστην καὶ λιπαρωτάτην δουλείαν δουλεύει.”

Translation: And he becomes a slave, as he enters the senate, then he serves in the handsomest and sleekest slavery.⁸¹

Epictetus sees a senator as the ‘handsomest and sleekest slave’ because while the senator has great wealth, he must serve the emperor. The senator must behave according to the emperor's wishes. Otherwise, the emperor can take away his wealth or his life. A man's insatiable desire for luxury retains him in another form of slavery.

Epictetus states that there is one type of slavery which occurs when the individual's actions are motivated by externals:

ἂν δὲ τὸ σωματίον θαυμάσω, δοῦλον ἑμαυτὸν παραδέδωκα: ἂν τὸ κτησείδιον, δοῦλον. εὐθύς γάρ [ἐμ]αὐτὸς κατ’ ἑμαυτοῦ δηλῶ, τίτιν ἄλωτός εἰμι.

⁸⁰ Epictetus, Discourses, IV.1.37-38

⁸¹ Epictetus, Discourses, IV.1.35-36

Translation: If I admire my paltry body, I have given myself away as a slave; if I admire my paltry property, I have given myself away as a slave; for at once I show thereby to my own hurt what I can be caught with.⁸²

Anytime the individual chooses to value externals rather than internals, they have given in to slavery. The legal slave is restricted in the same way as the senator; they are not able to live freely. While Epictetus criticizes people's desire for luxury, he seems to be more critical of the slave and ex-slaves. Epictetus criticizes their desire for manumission because both the slave and the freedman have placed too much value on the externals. He takes the attention away from institution of slavery by emphasizing moral slavery.

Argument against slavery: Even as Epictetus criticizes humans' desire for externals, he criticizes slavery because it is contrary to reason. Epictetus examines how three people view the act of holding the chamber pot. Based on the individual's rationality level, the act of holding a chamber pot is reasonable or unreasonable. The first man, a slave, sees the task as reasonable:

τῷ γάρ τινι εὐλογον τὸ ἀμίδα παρακρατεῖν αὐτὸ μόνον βλέποντι, ὅτι μὴ παρακρατήσας μὲν πληγὰς λήψεται καὶ τροφὰς οὐ λήψεται, παρακρατήσας δ' οὐ πείσεται τι τραχὺ ἢ ἀνιαρόν:

Translation: For to one man it is reasonable to hold a chamber-pot for another, since he considers only that, if he does not hold it, he will get a beating and will not get food, whereas, if he does hold it, nothing harsh or painful will be done to him,⁸³

⁸² Epictetus, Discourses, I.25.23-4

⁸³ Epictetus, Discourses, I.2.8

The slave rationalizes that it is better to hold the chamber pot than receive a beating. The slave wants to live without bodily injuries and behaves so that he maintains his master's favor. When he holds the chamber pot, he continues to receive food. Therefore, the slave has rationally decided that the act of holding the chamber pot is an acceptable alternative to getting a beating. Although the slave makes his decision based on his reasoning skills, he is not rational in terms of Stoicism because he places too much value on the externals, fear of punishment and food.

Another person finds that it is unreasonable and unacceptable to hold the chamber pot. This slave would rather receive a beating than subject himself to the degrading act of holding someone else's chamber pot. From this slave's perspective, the master has control over his body to treat it, beat it, or starve it. The slave realizes that he cannot compete with his master over his body. However, the slave has choices in his purpose and the way he views the world. William Stephens explains the Stoic's reasoning, "Here I am free to win by willing. There (in the material world) he can 'win' by killing me, but he cannot defeat my spirit if I refuse to let him".⁸⁴ This is an important distinction in self worth because the slave has moved away from worrying about the externals. Therefore, this slave has a higher rationality than the previous slave, who fears physical punishments.

There are those who look at the chamber pot from a completely different perspective. The freeborn Stoic sage, in the passage below, thinks it is irrational to have someone hold the chamber pot for him:

⁸⁴ Stephens, 2007: 118.

ἄλλω δέ τινι οὐ μόνον τὸ αὐτὸν παρακρατῆσαι ἀφόρητον δοκεῖ, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ ἄλλου παρακρατοῦντος ἀνασχέσθαι.

Translation: But for some man feels that it is not merely unendurable to hold such a pot himself, but even to tolerate another's going so.⁸⁵

The chamber pot holder is a hindrance to the Stoic sage's independence and makes him a slave to luxury. The Stoic wants to be happy or *eudaimon*, which means that he "lacks nothing, needs nothing, is fully self-sufficient, and secures this self-sufficiency by maintaining the proper Stoic judgments."⁸⁶ The Stoic sage does not depend on anyone and only uses what is absolutely necessary for his survival. Epictetus sets the Stoic sage apart from most of the Roman slave masters, who require a slave to hold the chamber pot. Epictetus wants to contrast someone with a lower rationality, the slave who cares about his body, external, to someone with a high rationality, a sage.

In this first case, Epictetus makes an important argument: anyone, including slaves, has the ability or the potential to reach a high rationality. The individual has the faculty to contemplate how the action (holding the chamber pot) can either benefit or harm his soul. The slave can be a true Stoic as long as he chooses to hold the chamber pot in order to maintain his virtue and satisfy his soul.

II. Slavery is contrary to nature: Epictetus follows the conventional Stoic thought that there were no natural slaves. Slavery is contrary to nature because all humans share in kinship with each other, share the same rationality with the divine, and desire personal freedom.

⁸⁵ Epictetus, Discourses, I.2.9

⁸⁶ Stephens, 2007: 142.

Human kinship: Since humans are the offspring of Zeus, all people are naturally brothers. This kinship means that people should treat each other with respect and compassion:

οὐ μεμνήσῃ τί εἶ καὶ τίνων ἄρχεις; ὅτι συγγενῶν, ὅτι ἀδελφῶν φύσει, ὅτι τοῦ
Διὸς ἀπογόνων.

Translation: Do you not remember what you are, and over whom you rule-that they are kinsmen, that they are brothers by nature, that they are the offspring of Zeus?⁸⁷

In order to have a proper friendship or kinship, there must be “fidelity, respect, a devotion to things honorable”.⁸⁸ Since it is human nature to love one another, it is also human nature to reciprocate these honorable things. Epictetus “asserts that humans are by nature noble, have a sense of shame, and that it is our nature to subordinate pleasure to the virtuous performance of our social duties”.⁸⁹ Epictetus places a high value on morality because he “staunchly believes that when human character is in accord with nature it is completely benevolent and devoid of vicious impulses”.⁹⁰ By nature the soul wants to be good because “the healthy soul, in acting virtuously toward others, promotes their survival and flourishing, and in so doing promotes its own survival and flourishing. Thus reason shows us that altruism is healthy”.⁹¹ The divine, who is also nature, made humans compassionate and kind. To live a life without kindness is to live contrary to nature:

⁸⁷ Epictetus, Discourses, I.13.5

⁸⁸ Epictetus, Discourses, II.22.30

⁸⁹ Stephens, 2007: 91.

⁹⁰ Stephens, 2007: 133.

⁹¹ Stephens, 2007: 139.

μή ποτ' οὖν οὕτως καὶ ἄνθρωπος δυστυχῆς ἐστὶν οὐχ ὁ μὴ δυνάμενος λέοντας
πνίγειν ἢ ἀνδριάντας περιλαμβάνειν (οὐ γὰρ πρὸς τοῦτο δυνάμεις τινὰς ἔχων
ἐλήλυθεν παρὰ τῆς φύσεως), ἀλλ' ὁ ἀπολωλεκὼς τὸ εὖγνωμον, ὁ τὸ πιστόν;

Translation: Does it not follow, then, that on the same principles a man is
wretched, not when he is unable to choke lions, or throw his arms about statues
(for no man has brought with him from nature into this world faculties of this),
but when he has lost his kindness, and his faithfulness?⁹²

Epictetus states that a man, who lost his kindness, should be mourned because he has lost his most human quality.⁹³ Epictetus explains that a horse is miserable when it cannot run and the dog is miserable when it cannot smell.⁹⁴ These animals are miserable because they lost a natural part of themselves. Similarly when a person loses his kindness, he is miserable. When humans lose their morality, they become something other than human beings because they lost the characteristic that defines them as humans.

Accomplishments mean nothing when humans live without kindness because it is a life that is contrary to nature.

Slaves were often beaten, starved, and chained together.⁹⁵ Since slave families did not have any legal rights and were not recognized as families, slave masters were able to break up the families through sale or master's will. Many young slaves, whether male or female, were subject to the sexual desires of their masters. These are all the conditions in which slaves live their daily lives. These conditions of slavery violate human nature and

⁹² Epictetus, Discourses, IV.5.14

⁹³ Epictetus, Discourses, IV.5.15: The reference to the lion is to the superhuman likeness of Heracles

⁹⁴ Epictetus, Discourses, IV.5.12-13

⁹⁵ Slaves were chained together locked in an *ergastulum*, which was a locked room in the estate. The slaves were chained and locked in order to prevent them from running away.

kinship. Slavery is contrary to nature because general treatment of slaves was inhumane and devoid of human kindness.

Counter argument - Natural/Providential order: While Stoics did not believe in natural slavery, they did believe that nature or the divine placed people into a providential order. An individual must surrender himself to his position and the providential order. He must come to terms with his “specific duties from his place or station or role or calling or function in society”.⁹⁶ The following passage falls in line with the conventional view that Stoicism generally supported the institution of slavery; Zeus took part in allowing humans to set up a hierarchy among themselves; therefore, the hierarchy seems to be part of nature. Since everything external comes from the divine, the human’s social stratification must also be the divine’s creation. The tenet states that all humans must surrender themselves to this divine order:

προσκατατέταχά μου τὴν ὀρμὴν τῷ θεῷ. θέλει μ’ ἐκεῖνος πυρέσσειν: κἀγὼ θέλω.
θέλει ὀρμᾶν ἐπὶ τι: κἀγὼ θέλω. θέλει ὀρέγεσθαι: κἀγὼ θέλω. θέλει με τυχεῖν
τινος: κἀγὼ βούλομαι. οὐ θέλει: οὐ βούλομαι.

Translation: I have submitted my freedom of choice unto God. He wills that I shall have fever; it is my will too. He wills that I should choose something; it is my will too. He wills that I should desire something; it is my will too. He wills that I should get something; it is my wish too. He does not will it; I do not wish it.⁹⁷

If Zeus wills a person to be a slave, that person should also wish to be a slave. If Zeus wills for a person to become ill, that person should also wish to be ill. Epictetus states

⁹⁶ Patterson, 1991: 275.

⁹⁷ Epictetus, Discourses, IV.1.89-91

that if a general places a soldier to a specific position, the soldier should do whatever he could to carry out his general's orders.⁹⁸ Therefore, it would be ridiculous to think that the same person would abandon the post Zeus has given him in society.⁹⁹ This logic also applies to slavery. For each slave, Zeus chose a master and a particular duty in life. It is the slave's obligation to live the life Zeus has chosen for him. This is the strong argument for slavery and Epictetus generally follows this Stoic tenet. However, Epictetus departs from this idea of providential order because the human relationship with the divine is more complicated.

Share in the Divine rationality: Slavery is contrary to nature, because as the offspring of Zeus, humans share in the same rationality as the divine. According to Orlando Patterson, Epictetus sees the relationship with the divine in three different ways. First, "we are free because we are one with the almighty, all-knowing power of gods, the divine administrator".¹⁰⁰ Epictetus states that Zeus is the father of humans as well as all the other gods.¹⁰¹ In this relationship, Zeus is the supreme ruler and he allows humans to be free. Second, the relationship is defined as "more as a kind of power sharing, an inner civic freedom, in which the inner person is a citizen who shares in the running of the divine administration".¹⁰² As co-administrator, the divine controlled one aspect, the externals, and the humans controlled the other, the internals. The divine gave people the freedom to govern their own morality. This freedom allows humans to decide between right and wrong, and how they should live their lives. In the third relationship, Zeus has

⁹⁸ Epictetus, Discourses, I.9.24-26

⁹⁹ Epictetus, Discourses, I.9.24-26: Epictetus paraphrases Plato's *Apology*. 29C and 28E.

¹⁰⁰ Patterson, 1991: 282.

¹⁰¹ Epictetus, Discourses, I.3.1

¹⁰² Patterson, 1991: 282.

given his people total freedom, “including the freedom to disobey him”.¹⁰³ Zeus still has the power to control all externals, but even he doesn’t have the power to control another person’s morality:

τὸ σκέλος μου δήσεις, τὴν προαίρεσιν δὲ οὐδ’ ὁ Ζεὺς νικῆσαι δύναται.

Translation: My leg you will fetter, but my moral purpose not even Zeus himself has power to overcome.¹⁰⁴

While the slave master can subject his slave to punishments, he does not have the power to change the slave’s morality. The total freedom to disobey is part of Zeus’ nature.

The slave can either choose to get a beating or to follow his master’s command. The important distinction is that the slave has the ability to either accept or reject his master’s order. Epictetus states that Zeus has provided humans with capacity not only to endure life, but also to make decisions:

ἀκώλυτον τοῦτο ἔδωκεν, ἀνανάγκαστον, ἀπαραπόδιστον, ὅλον αὐτὸ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν
ἐποίησεν οὐδ’ αὐτῷ τινα πρὸς τοῦτο ἰσχὺν ἀπολιπὼν, ὥστε κωλύσαι ἢ
ἐμποδίσαι.

Translation: He has given them to us free from all restraints, compulsion, hindrance; He has put the whole matter under our control without reserving even for Himself any power to prevent to hinder.¹⁰⁵

Part of the divine nature provides rationality to humans so that they can make good or bad decisions. The decision is completely within the control of the people. This idea

¹⁰³ Patterson, 1991: 283.

¹⁰⁴ Epictetus, Discourses, I.1.23

¹⁰⁵ Epictetus, Discourses, I.6.40

implies that violence and slavery exist not because of divine providence, but rather from people's bad decisions.

Epictetus argues that human beings are naturally free and can only become subject to moral slavery by their own actions:

μη γένοιτο: οὐκ ἐνδέχεται τὸ φύσει ἐλεύθερον ὑπ' ἄλλου τινὸς ταραχθῆναι ἢ κωλυθῆναι πλὴν ὑφ' ἑαυτοῦ. ἀλλὰ τὰ δόγματα αὐτὸν ταρασσει... ἐμὲ ὁ Ζεὺς ἐλεύθερον ἀφῆκεν. ἢ δοκεῖς ὅτι ἔμελλεν τὸν ἴδιον υἱὸν εἶναι καταδουλοῦσθαι; τοῦ νεκροῦ δέ μου κύριος εἶ, λάβε αὐτόν.

Translation: It is not possible that that which is by nature free should be disturbed or thwarted by anything but itself. But it is man's own judgment that disturbs him.¹⁰⁶ ...Zeus has set me free. Or do you really think that he was likely to let his own son be made a slave? You are, however, master of my dead body, take it.¹⁰⁷

In this passage, the Stoic man claims that no man can enslave him because he is the son of Zeus. This is a bold statement against slavery, which claims that Zeus gave freedom to all his children. Zeus' gift to humans is the ability to reason and humans can use this gift to reject the oppression placed by tyrants or cruel masters.

Humans are in kinship with god, so no one has the right to enslave another person. Therefore, it is contrary to the will of god to enslave another human. Epictetus' position in the passage above is his strongest argument against slavery and he comes closest to abolitionism. He implies that slavery is man-made because it was established contrary to the divine providence and nature. In the fourth century, a Christian bishop named Gregory of Nyssa shared this same idea. During a conversation with a slave-owner, he

¹⁰⁶ Epictetus, Discourses, I.19.7-8:

¹⁰⁷ Epictetus, Discourses, I.19.9:

asked, “[Do you not see] that you condemn to slavery a man who is by nature free and self-empowered, and that you set up laws in rivalry with God, overthrowing His law which is based upon nature?”¹⁰⁸ Gregory’s question was a radical idea at that time and a rare criticism of slavery in antiquity. Slavery is contrary to nature because it violates the divine will.

Human nature to desire freedom: It is a part of human nature to be free and not be placed in a figurative cage. Epictetus takes the conventional Stoic tenet that all humans are naturally free and emphasizes why it is bad to hinder another person’s freedom. He uses a caged lion and bird as an analogy, in which he illustrates his point that all humans naturally desire freedom. When a captured lion is fed by a person and kept in a cage, it is not considered free. When the lion becomes tamer, it becomes more of a slave because he lives more softly.¹⁰⁹ The lion is then completely dependent on the owner for food and shelter. The lion does not live in accordance to nature. He no longer lives by hunting on his own and living among his peers; therefore, he no longer resembles a lion. Epictetus draws a parallel of the lion and the slave to emphasize his point: it is contrary to nature to imprison what is naturally free. In contrast, a bird would rather starve and die than to continue its existence in a cage.¹¹⁰ When someone opens the cage door, it escapes:

οὕτως ὀρέγεται τῆς φυσικῆς ἐλευθερίας καὶ τοῦ αὐτόνομα καὶ ἀκώλυτα εἶναι.
καὶ τί σοι κακόν ἐστιν ἐνταῦθα; ‘οἷα λέγεις; πέτεσθαι πέφυκα ὅπου θέλω,
ὑπαιθρον διάγειν, ἄδειν ὅταν θέλω· σύ με πάντων τούτων ἀφαιρῇ καὶ λέγεις ‘τί
σοι κακόν ἐστιν;

¹⁰⁸ Gregory of Nyssa in Migne, J.P. *Patrologiae Graecae* 44: col. 644.

¹⁰⁹ Epictetus, *Discourses*, IV.1.25

¹¹⁰ Epictetus, *Discourses*, IV.1.26

Translation: Such is desire for physical freedom, and a life of independence and freedom from restraint. And what is wrong with you here in your cage? ‘What a question! My nature is to fly in the open air, to sing when I please. You rob me of all this, and then ask ‘What is wrong with you?’¹¹¹

Epictetus states that humans desire personal and physical freedom, just as this bird. It is rational that some captives would rather die than live as slaves, just as the bird would rather starve than to live in a cage. When a captor takes away the captive’s freedom, the captor strips away the captive’s natural ability to live independently and without hindrance. The slave depends on the master for food and shelter. He is no longer in control of his life. Zeus created all animals with a desire for personal freedom. Contrary to the divine nature, slavery hindered humans from exercising that freedom.

Humans not destined for service: In the passage below, Epictetus clarifies that the divine created animals to service humans, but humans have a larger purpose:

κεχώρισαι θηρίων, κεχώρισαι προβάτων. ἐπὶ τούτοις πολίτης εἶ τοῦ κόσμου καὶ μέρος αὐτοῦ, οὐχ ἔν τῶν ὑπηρετικῶν, ἀλλὰ τῶν προηγουμένων:
 παρακολουθητικὸς γὰρ εἶ τῇ θείᾳ διοικήσει καὶ τοῦ ἐξῆς ἐπιλογιστικός.

Translation: You are separated from wild beasts, you are separated from sheep. In addition to this you are a citizen of the world, and a part of it, not one of the parts destined for service, but one of primary importance; for you possess the faculty of understanding the divine administration of the world, and of reasoning upon the consequences thereof.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Epictetus, Discourses, IV.1.27-28

¹¹² Epictetus, Discourses, II.10.3-4

Humans have the rationality to process information about the world and to be active participants or citizens in that world. This mental understanding is what set humans apart from animals. The important part of this passage is that humans were not destined for service. Therefore, it is contrary to nature that a man should service another man, as the case in slavery.

Force and violence is contrary to nature: Bernard Williams summarizes the ancient Greek ideology that humans have natural tendencies and if something goes against this natural tendency, “it is *biaion*, and involves force or constraint”.¹¹³ Force or violence is a sign that something is contrary to nature because it goes against human kindness and generosity.

Epictetus takes the earlier Greeks thoughts and adds his argument; it is contrary to nature to receive violence and force. No one should be subject to violence or force because:

Ἐλεύθερός ἐστιν ὁ ζῶν ὡς βούλεται, ὃν οὔτ’ ἀναγκάσαι ἔστιν οὔτε κωλύσαι
οὔτε βιάσασθαι, οὐ αἱ ὁρμαὶ ἀνεμπόδιστοι, αἱ ὀρέξεις ἐπιτευκτικαί, αἱ ἐκκλίσεις
ἀπερίπτωτοι.

Translation: He is free who lives as he wills, who is subject neither to compulsion, nor hindrance, nor force, whose choices are unhampered, whose desires attain their end, whose aversions do not fall into what they would avoid.¹¹⁴

A free person has the natural ability to live without hindrance and deceit. He is not made a fool by others nor acts rashly or violently. He does not practice injustice to live unchecked or excessively. He does not become annoyed and irritated nor live a

¹¹³ Williams, 1993: 113.

¹¹⁴ Epictetus, Discourses, IV.1.1

miserable and wretched life. These are the signs of living in error and living badly. These traits are also associated with slavery and the continuation of these behaviors denied the reality of slavery. Since slavery is intrinsically violent and non-compassionate, it goes against the morality of the one using force and violence, but also the person who receives them.

Social order is not perfect: As seen in Chapter 1, the Stoic tenets claim only the good and wise are supposed to rule. However, there is a problem with the system when the tyrants such as Nero and Domitian ruled. Slavery exists as part of the imperfection in the social order, just as tyrants exist by using violence and force to rule. A tyrant is someone who is not willing to listen to others and constantly uses violence against another. A tyrant acts against nature and he is anything but a human being.

οὗτος οὐκ ἀκούει λόγου, οὐ παρακολουθεῖ ἐλεγχόμενος· ὄνος ἐστίν. τούτου τὸ αἰδῆμον ἀπονενέκρωται· ἄχρηστός ἐστιν, πάντα μᾶλλον ἢ ἄνθρωπος. οὗτος ζητεῖ, τίνα ἀπαντήσας λακτίσῃ ἢ δάκῃ· ὥστε οὐδὲ πρόβατον ἢ ὄνος, ἀλλὰ τίποτε ἄγριον θηρίον.

Translation: Here is a man who does not listen to reason, he does not understand when he is confuted; he is an ass. Here is a man who is looking for someone whom he can kick or bite when he meets him; so that he is not even a sheep or an ass, but some wild beast.¹¹⁶

Epictetus understands that even the tyrants must be obeyed to a certain degree because he does not believe it is his job to change the political system. It is useless to change the minds of politicians because that belongs to the externals. In this imperfect system,

¹¹⁶ Epictetus, Discourses, IV.5.21

individuals must correct the mistakes through education and constant moral discipline within themselves. In this education:

The Stoic holds that the master, e.g. the emperor, does not really have more power than the slave, but is just able to indulge his slavish desires (for externals) and vain aspirations better. This is a slave's ethic. The point of moral agency is to be in control (the slave's *ressentiment*); but the slave and the emperor, his master, have the same capacity for control.¹¹⁷

Slavery is part of human weakness, a weakness to luxuries. Stoic education helps individuals to overcome many basic human weaknesses.¹¹⁸

From the slave's perspective: Epictetus' most compelling criticism of slavery is his narrative. He examines slavery from the slave's point of view as someone who had experience slavery firsthand. Epictetus is unique because there are no other extant writings from the slave's perspective including Terence, an ex-slave and playwright. Epictetus is able to provide insight into the slave's psyche and how the slaves view their condition. Epictetus' perspective treats slaves as humans and not mere tools, which was the typical treatment of slaves. He criticizes slavery because he felt the same constraint as the slaves. After his own manumission, Epictetus continues to search for freedom. Epictetus explains to the slaves that manumission does not always lead to freedom. The slave equates status and wealth with freedom, but this is a misconception. Luxuries will only subject the person into a different form of slavery because he must pay insincere compliments to the person who provides him with the luxuries he seeks. As a teacher and a philosopher, Epictetus provides a set of guidelines to live a virtuous life, free from

¹¹⁷ Stephens, 2007: 118.

¹¹⁸ Stephens, 2007: 19.

violence, force, and hindrance. Using greedy and ambitious ex-slaves as examples, he tries to educate people to be better Stoics.

What it means to live according to reason and nature: While the connection between the institution of slavery and moral health of a person seem abstract, Epictetus makes his point clear. Anyone who follows the moral ethics of Stoicism will live with compassion and steer away from violence and the use of force. He never states that slavery should be abolished. However, once the negative aspects of slavery such as violence and force disappear, the institution of slavery cannot survive. The slaves would not remain in their position without proper compensation if the slave owners could not use force and violence. As Bernard Williams states, “no one who could live a free person’s life would want to be a slave”.¹¹⁹ It is within all humans to desire family relationships and to live their lives as they desire.

The traditional definition of slavery states that the slaves are not treated as human but rather as property. The slave masters had complete control over the slaves including the right to beat and kill them. The slaves were stripped of all human rights such as family, home, national identity, and right to own property. However, slavery would cease to exist if the slaves were allowed them to marry, form families, and not be subject to beating.

Epictetus understood that it was monumental feat for people to follow Stoic ethics and only the truly wise accomplished it. When someone asked Epictetus whether he was free, he answered that he was not:

¹¹⁹ Williams, 1993: 114.

Θέλω νῆ τοὺς θεοὺς καὶ εὖχομαι, ἀλλ' οὐπω δύναμαι ἀντιβλέψαι τοῖς κυρίοις,
 ἔτι τιμῶ τὸ σωματίον, ὀλόκληρον αὐτὸ ἔχειν ἀντὶ πολλοῦ ποιοῦμαι καίτοι μηδ'
 ὀλόκληρον ἔχων.

Translation: By the gods I wish to be, and pray to be, but I am not yet able to
 look into the face of my masters, still honor my paltry body, I take great pains to
 keep it sound, although it is not sound in any case.¹²⁰

Epictetus answered that he was not free because external matters preoccupied his mind. While he understood these conditions were outside of his control, he had trouble letting it go. One of the things he referred to was his lameness, which he suffered during his childhood, perhaps at the hands of Epaphroditus. By paying attention and worrying about his body, he showed that could not conquer his desire to control the externals. Thus he was still a slave to his desires to live a healthy and long life. The point he makes is that everyone has the tools to be a kind human being with high morals, but irrational impulses to external desires hinder even a scholar like himself.

Conclusion: Romans saw slavery as a necessary part of their economy; therefore, they never saw the institution of slavery as unjust. Otherwise, slavery would cease to exist.¹²¹ In some instances, the Stoics seem to support slavery because Stoicism taught people to live according to the lot given by the divine providence. In other cases, the Stoics seem to oppose slavery since they did not believe in natural slavery. There is evidence that Epictetus found slavery to be contrary to reason and nature, but he never advocated abolition. It is logical to assume an abolition movement when such evidence exists. However, the lack of such movement is a problem for modern readers. The

¹²⁰ Epictetus, Discourses, IV.1.151

¹²¹ Williams, 1993: 117.

problem comes from the Stoic tenet, which states that a Stoic should not worry about things he could not change. An attempt to abolish slavery would have been an attempt to change the external and therefore it was contrary to the Stoic teaching.

Orlando Patterson makes a bold argument: Epictetus' desire for personal freedom opens up a possibility that Epictetus actually didn't believe in the tenets of Stoicism. Epictetus does not disagree with Stoic view of freedom and takes the issue seriously. However, he seems dissatisfied with his inability to act as he pleases. In order to be free, one must not have any masters, an impossible task during this time period. Epictetus seems to struggle with some of the inconsistency between theory and practice. However, he appears sincere in his teachings. He attempted to work within the social and political context to mold the minds of future leaders. He was aware of his inability to change the system, but he attempted to give his students the ability to make good, moral choices. He was solely concern for the moral ethics. He knew that he could not change the minds of anyone, including the politicians. It was irrational for him to even try. However, it was his duty as a teacher to provide his students and listeners with the tools to make rational choices.

A true Stoic sage doesn't need luxuries such as slaves and he would find that owning a slave would go against his moral health. Epictetus states that even a slave can be a Stoic sage, but only when the slave doesn't fear punishment or bodily harm. Stoicism teaches people to be modest and rid themselves of external desires such as luxuries, wealth, and status. Slaves symbolize the wealth of the slave master. Epictetus' teachings state that it was contrary to reason to desire externals and it was contrary to nature to use violence and force. Therefore, slavery was contrary to both reason and nature.

Chapter 3: Comparison of Seneca and Marcus Aurelius to Epictetus

All the Stoics shared common views on many issues, but they also viewed the world with a slightly different perspective based on their situations in life. Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius had many common ideas based on Stoicism, but they differ in other aspects such as how they lived their lives and how they interpreted the Stoic philosophy. This chapter explores how these men share similarities and differences on the topic of slavery and freedom.

Seneca's Biography: Lucius Annaeus Seneca was born around 1 BCE to an aristocratic Equestrian family.¹²² He studied rhetoric and philosophy in Rome.¹²³ Agrippina, Emperor Claudius' wife and Nero's mother, placed Seneca as Nero's tutor.¹²⁴ Seneca served as one of Nero's advisors after Nero's ascension to the throne and as an advisor, he wrote the treatise *De clementia*.¹²⁵ Seneca wrote on many different topics in his speeches, tragedies, and philosophical dissertations.¹²⁶ After the Pisonian Conspiracy, Seneca committed suicide in 65 CE.¹²⁷ An interesting connection between Epictetus and Seneca is through Epaphroditus, an ex-master of Epictetus and the person who uncovered the Pisonian Conspiracy, which led to Seneca's suicide.¹²⁸ Seneca is an important figure in Stoicism because much of his philosophical writings survive.

There are no natural slaves: Seneca follows the Stoic model, which claims that there are no natural slaves. Similar to Epictetus, Seneca states, "all men share in the

¹²² Bril's New Pauly

¹²³ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

¹²⁴ Tac. Ann. 12, 8

¹²⁵ Tac. Ann. 13, 11

¹²⁶ Bril's New Pauly

¹²⁷ Bril's New Pauly

¹²⁸ Eck, 1976: 381.

divine reason and thus may claim the gods as ancestors”¹²⁹; therefore no one is better than the other because of birth.¹³⁰ Miriam Griffin states that the idea slavery was unnatural goes back to the sophists. Seneca takes the idea of unnatural slavery to provide a guideline for masters to treat their slaves with kindness; however, he didn’t advocate abolition.¹³²

Kind treatment of slaves: Seneca states that a slave should “be spared from punishment, which is appropriate only for animals”.¹³³ The point Seneca makes here is interesting because slave masters sometimes placed more value on animals than on slaves. Seneca continues by stating, “the virtue of *humanitas* and *clementia* should govern our relationship with slaves as with other men”, and a man fulfils his obligations to help others when he shows kindness towards slaves and freedmen.¹³⁴ This is consistent with Epictetus’ teaching that humans should treat each other in kinship and kindness. Seneca also states that slaves can be treated as social equals when masters have conversation with them, seek advice from them, and invite them to dine, not only during the Saturnalia.¹³⁵ Seneca states in his Letter 47 that the slave can have a soul of a free person, “ ‘*Servus est.* ’ *Sed fortasse liber animo* ” or translated as “ ‘He is a slave.’ His soul, however, may be that of a freeman”.¹³⁶ This is also consistent with Epictetus, that all humans have the ability to be free. Seneca’s goal was converting the minds of masters

¹²⁹ Griffin, 1976: 257.

¹³⁰ Ben.3.28, edited by Aubrey Stewart (the Gutenberg Project) 2009

¹³² Griffin, 1976: 257.

¹³³ Griffin, 1976: 258.

¹³⁴ Griffin, 1976: 258-9.

¹³⁵ Griffin, 1976: 259

¹³⁶ Sen. Ep. 47.17

to love their slaves, controlling their anger, and being just.¹³⁷ Orlando Patterson states that Seneca was genuinely concerned for the slaves.

Another reason Seneca advised slave masters to treat slaves with kindness is based on economics and politics. This is where Seneca and Epictetus differ. Epictetus is only concerned with philosophy and moral ethics, while Seneca, a senator, is concerned with economy and the safety of the empire. Seneca argues against cruelty towards slaves because it may harm the masters' finances when the slaves flee or die.¹³⁹ Seneca follows the long tradition, which states that giving positive re-enforcement can be more beneficial to the master and get more production from the slaves. Earlier elites such as Cato the Elder and Varro shared this belief.¹⁴⁰ Seneca states that moderate treatment prevents slaves from retaliation by murdering the slave master or other revenge, which alludes to a security concern that the slaves might revolt as seen during the late republic.¹⁴¹ However, Seneca never challenges the masters' power (*potestas*). He simply advises the masters to wait until their anger subsided so that they can deliver a fair punishment to the slaves.¹⁴²

Master's perspective: As seen in Chapter 2, Epictetus looks at slavery and freedom from both the slaves' and the masters' points of view. However, Seneca shows no interest in slaves.¹⁴³ Most of Seneca's writings are addressed to his peers and not the slaves, while Epictetus spoke with everyone including the slaves.¹⁴⁴ Seneca often takes the masters' side by describing slaves, as "lazy and unwilling labor" and worried that the

¹³⁷ Griffin, 1976: 276.

¹³⁹ Griffin, 1976: 263.

¹⁴⁰ Griffin, 1976: 263. Varro used both punishment and rewards. He also saw slaves as tools as in the Aristotelian view.

¹⁴¹ Griffin, 1976: 263-4.

¹⁴² Bradley, 1986: 169.

¹⁴³ Griffin, 1976: 275.

¹⁴⁴ Bradley, 1986:167.

slaves might rob the master.¹⁴⁵ Seneca paints a sympathetic picture of slave masters' fear and possible murder by slaves. Example of this fear is when the Senate proposed that slaves wear a different colored toga, but the Senators feared the danger of slaves finding out just how many slaves were out there.¹⁴⁶ Seneca knew that some of the masters deserved their fate, but he also understood their fears.¹⁴⁷

Epictetus and Seneca share many similarities, as both of their teachings tend to advocate for kind treatment of slaves. Despite many similarities, there are two main differences. First, Epictetus' reason for kind treatment was to keep a healthy soul. While Seneca was concerned for the soul of the slave master, he also worried about getting the most production from the slaves and safety of the slave masters. Second, Epictetus looks at the issues from all different perspectives: slave, slave master, and sometimes even an emperor. Seneca is only concerned with sharing his advice with his peers or other elites in the empire. Also, Seneca's advice on kind treatment of slaves was not a new idea. As Miriam Griffin points out, "cruel masters were regarded in scorn".¹⁴⁸ Seneca was not particularly enlightened in the subject, and he was not a pioneer in advocating fair treatments.

An important Stoic philosopher during the second century CE is Marcus Aurelius. As Orlando Patterson points out, Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus provide an interesting insight into slavery and freedom because they are two Stoic thinkers, who came from

¹⁴⁵ Griffin, 1976: 262.

¹⁴⁶ Griffin, 1976: 267. The elites worried that if the slaves realized there were so many of them, the slaves might start a revolt.

¹⁴⁷ Griffin, 1976: 267.

¹⁴⁸ Griffin, 1976: 266.

opposite ends of the social and political spectrum.¹⁴⁹ While Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius may share the same philosophy, their life experience plays an important role in how each define freedom and slavery. Orlando Patterson believes the important difference is in Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus' experience with freedom.¹⁵⁰ Epictetus suffered through slavery and was later manumitted while Marcus Aurelius was a freeborn and ruled over the entire empire. As a Stoic and an emperor, Marcus Aurelius was in a unique position of power to change the laws regarding slaves.

Marcus Aurelius' Biography: Marcus Annius Verus was born in 121 CE.¹⁵¹ He studied rhetoric and philosophy, but he was especially interested in Stoicism and Epictetus.¹⁵² At the age of 18, Antoninus Pius adopted him, and Marcus Aurelius became Emperor in 161 CE.¹⁵³ He ruled jointly with Lucius Verus from 161-169 CE.¹⁵⁴ Throughout his reign, Marcus Aurelius faced many problems from Germany, northern Italy, and Egypt.¹⁵⁵ He left his mark on history through a private journal written in Greek known as the *Meditations* that contained his thoughts.¹⁵⁶ He constantly tried to live according to the Stoic tenets and as a philosopher.¹⁵⁷ Marcus Aurelius died while on campaign in 180 CE.¹⁵⁸

Intended Audience and perspective: We have textual evidence from both Epictetus (*Discourses*) and Marcus Aurelius (*Meditations*); these books provide valuable insight

¹⁴⁹ Patterson, 1991: 275.

¹⁵⁰ Patterson, 1991: 275.

¹⁵¹ Bril's New Pauly

¹⁵² Stanford Encyclopedia: Marcus Aurelius

¹⁵³ Stanford Encyclopedia: Marcus Aurelius

¹⁵⁴ Bril's New Pauly

¹⁵⁵ Stanford Encyclopedia: Marcus Aurelius

¹⁵⁶ Bril's New Pauly

¹⁵⁷ Stanford Encyclopedia: Marcus Aurelius

¹⁵⁸ Bril's New Pauly

into their opinions. Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* was a journal written for his personal use in which he searches for the answer to his own personal freedom.¹⁵⁹ Epictetus' *Discourses* were for his students, some of whom later became politicians. In the *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius felt isolated from his "supreme greatness".¹⁶⁰ His position as ruler and emperor was not a choice he made, but he felt it was his duty to rule without complaint. He sought freedom not by living in extravagance as Nero, but looked to Stoicism to accept his office in life. As discussed many times, Epictetus looked at the issues from both the master and slave's perspective. While the *Meditations* dealt with Marcus Aurelius' internal struggle for freedom, his view on slavery was purely political. While he struggled with the question of inner freedom, he was clear on the institution of slavery. As an emperor, he made changes to the law that in theory alleviated unjust punishments for slaves, but he also placed harsher punishment for slaves who committed crimes.

Providential order: Orlando Patterson mentions that there are many similarities between Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. Patterson cites P.A. Brunt to explain the two main similarities:

Both insisted that a citizen of the great city which includes both gods and men must welcome all the dispensations of providence and be active for the good of his fellows. Both derive individuals' specific duties from his place or station or role or calling or function in society.¹⁶¹

Brunt states that Marcus Aurelius firmly believed in "slavery as an institution" by the above reference to the Stoic doctrine. Marcus Aurelius believed that "whatever befalls is

¹⁵⁹ Patterson, 1991: 276.

¹⁶⁰ Patterson, 1991: 276: "supreme greatness" is mentioned in Seneca's *On Clemency*

¹⁶¹ Patterson, 1991: 275.

just”.¹⁶² That we should not even wish ‘that something had not been, or were not now, or should not be hereafter, of all that is appointed by that which ordains all things,’ which prescribes for every man what falls to him”.¹⁶³ Since Marcus Aurelius believed in the providential order, he never made any “sweeping changes, and it probably never occurred to him that the institution of slavery, which existed in all lands and times of which he knew, was not part of the divine plan”.¹⁶⁴

Laws: As an emperor, Marcus Aurelius’ main concern with slavery is through the laws. Marcus Aurelius did not make many changes to slavery laws and his “general attitude was conservative”.¹⁶⁵ He followed the model of his predecessors, especially Pius, in maintaining the tradition and any changes to the law followed the traditions and customs. Marcus Aurelius “issued a ‘general letter’ requiring provincial governors, local magistrates, and soldiers in provincial postings, to assist in” recovering runaway slaves and “penalized person for harboring fugitives with wrong intent”.¹⁶⁶ One of the few cases in which Marcus Aurelius makes a “most startling and innovatory ruling in favor of manumission is contained in a rescript address to Popilius Rufus”, in which Marcus awarded the estate contrary to the normal law in order to free the slaves rather than sell the slaves to repay the debt of the deceased.¹⁶⁷

Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius looked inward, to the soul, to understand slavery and freedom. While the teaching of Seneca and Epictetus tended to favor against slavery, neither men vocally advocated for abolition. However, Marcus Aurelius firmly

¹⁶² Brunt, 1998: 140.

¹⁶³ Brunt, 1998: 140.

¹⁶⁴ Brunt, 1998: 141.

¹⁶⁵ Brunt, 1998: 141.

¹⁶⁶ Brunt, 1998: 142.

¹⁶⁷ Brunt, 1998: 145-6.

believed in the institution of slavery as part of the divine order. There is no evidence that Stoicism increase the manumission rate. There is also no evidence that some masters and slaves had an affectionate relationship due to the moral teachings of Seneca and Epictetus. Seneca advocated for kind and fair treatment of slaves to help the slave masters. Marcus Aurelius concentrated on laws that would provide just rewards and punishments in order to protect the empire and its citizens.

.....

Conclusion: There is no concrete evidence that shows the Stoics' position on the institution of slavery. On the one hand, they did not believe in natural slavery. On the other hand, they believed humans should accept their position in life. This apparent between conflict between the two belief system didn't concern the Stoics because they concentrated solely on the internals, all the things that help maintain a soul through virtue and wisdom. The Stoics believed that externals were not important because they were outside of the person's control. They saw slavery as external and any attempts to abolish slavery would have been an attempt to change the external and therefore it was irrelevant to the Stoic teaching. These considerations derived from Stoic philosophy, but social inertia played a role also. The Stoics were not revolutionaries. It would have never occurred to affluent Romans to consider the abolition of slavery, an ancient and apparently ubiquitous institution. Indeed, most aristocratic men of the Roman Empire did not even see the institution as essentially unjust.

As an ex-slave and a Stoic philosopher, Epictetus is the ideal candidate for scholars to gain insight on the institution of slavery from a slave's perspective. One might expect

him at least to criticize slavery, but Epictetus never discussed whether the institution of slavery was just or unjust in the *Discourses*. There are several potential reasons for Epictetus' silence on this topic. First, the Roman Empire was a slave society and it depended on the slave population to maintain its economy. Second, Epictetus instructed the aristocratic young men of the Roman Empire, whose families were slave-owners. Arrian, the recorder of the *Discourses*, even became a senator. Epictetus' lectures reflected the values of his students and of the ruling class. Third, even if Epictetus had spoken out against slavery, it does not guarantee that his opinions would have survived in the textual evidence. Slave-owning aristocrats would not have paid to preserve any text that painted a negative view of their lifestyle. Fourth, there is no evidence Epictetus wrote down any of his thoughts as in the case of Marcus Aurelius, and four other books of the *Discourses* are not extant¹⁶⁸, which may or may not provide additional insights.

Lack of clear evidence is a problem for modern scholarship in determining Epictetus' opinion, but Epictetus' lectures were influenced by his background. Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius shared the same Stoic tenets and similar viewpoints on majority of the issues. However based on their life experiences and their social position, they looked at freedom and slavery from a slightly different perspective. Seneca was a rich, aristocratic man, who owned many slaves. Marcus Aurelius was an emperor, who was in charge of the entire empire and its population. Epictetus was an ex-slave and a teacher to many aristocratic young men. Their backgrounds played an important role in how they saw slavery. Seneca and Epictetus criticized certain aspects of slavery, but they were not abolitionists. Marcus Aurelius firmly believed in the institution of slavery.

¹⁶⁸ Oldfather, 1925: xii-xiii

Although Epictetus was not an abolitionist, he provides an inner psyche of slaves. Epictetus criticized slavery from the only position he could, from a moral standpoint. Epictetus thought slavery was contrary to reason and nature. Slavery was contrary to reason because slavery places a high value on externals. Slavery was contrary to nature because it used force and violence to maintain the institution. As important, he often taught philosophy from the slave's rather than the master's point of view. Epictetus' provides a unique insight into slavery because of his experience as a slave, which sets him apart from the other scholars in the ancient world.

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